

# **NORTH CAROLINA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION**

## **2021 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA**

The North Carolina School Boards Association (NCSBA) is a volunteer membership association representing all 115 local boards of education in North Carolina and the board of the Cherokee Central School. NCSBA provides advocacy, leadership, and services that enable school boards to govern at the highest level. For the general improvement and betterment of public education in North Carolina, NCSBA will advocate for the following items during the 2021 legislative session.

### **COVID-19**

LEAs have endured a year of challenges due to COVID-19, unlike any in our lifetime. This pandemic will unfortunately continue to present countless hurdles well beyond the day when it is finally under control. LEAs must therefore be granted waivers and additional flexibilities to face the fallout head-on. Examples include the flexibility to allow LEAs to move resources to cover critical needs and deliver meals to students. Another need for districts is the extension of some testing waivers and the suspension of their associated statutes. NCSBA believes those tests should be taken by as many students as possible, however, the results should not be used for punitive purposes, e.g., salaries, bonuses, and school grades.

In conjunction with additional school funding, the General Assembly should continue appropriations for internet connectivity, computer devices, mental health support personnel, and personal protective equipment (PPE). NCSBA believes that any state investments in computer equipment and connectivity should be credited toward the \$730 million in school technology funding owed to public schools from a 2008 court judgement.

### **Pandemic Learning Loss**

COVID-19 has been devastating for a large percentage of North Carolina's students. There is no doubt that for a variety of reasons virtual learning has not met the standards of an in-school education. Extraordinary measures are needed to combat the learning loss that has occurred since March 2020. Our students are in dire need of remedial instruction. Decisions made in the coming months and years will determine whether tens of thousands of students experience long term success or failure.

Among the options, school districts should have the ability to extend the current and upcoming school years to help address the educational gaps and provide students with opportunities to get back on track. Consideration should also be given to funding additional supports, e.g., intensive tutoring and targeted summer programs. Otherwise, we are likely to see record numbers of students either being held back, dropping out, or not reaching their full potential. The General Assembly should also assess the annual impact of learning loss to help determine additional needs in future years.

### **Accountability**<sup>1</sup>

*School Grades:* Measures should strive to capture the level of student learning taking place in each classroom, school, and district. The current formula for school grades, 80% student proficiency and 20% student growth, misses the mark. Increasing the weight of student growth will more accurately reflect a school's impact on student achievement. Alternatively, two separate grades, one for student achievement and one for student growth, provide more transparency and could make it easier for stakeholders to understand.

*Testing:* North Carolina's accountability system should undergo a comprehensive review to develop its defined purpose(s) and revamp the testing program to achieve the stated goals.

*Designation:* Studies show that there is a negative correlation between poverty and academic success. Therefore, in an effort for full transparency, high poverty schools should receive a special designation and targeted supports.

*Low-Performing Schools:* It is important to modify the definition of a low performing school because the current label is extremely misleading. A school that "meets expected growth" should not be labeled as low performing. One could argue that a "D school" that meets expected growth is doing better by its students than a "B school" that is not meeting expected growth.

### **School Construction/Capital**

LEAs face a multi-billion-dollar backlog of school construction needs due to aging infrastructure, smaller K-3 class sizes, average daily membership (ADM) growth, and school safety concerns. The General Assembly can help with school facility

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<sup>1</sup>Satisfies the 2021 Leandro Action Plan

needs by allowing North Carolinians to vote on a significant statewide school bond that allows for new construction, renovation, and safety improvements. The time is now, while interest rates are at historic lows.

The Needs-Based Lottery Grant program provides additional supports to LEAs in Tier I and Tier II counties. However, when a grant is awarded, all school districts in that county, including the applicant, forfeit their share of the annual \$100 million Public School Building Capital Fund (Annual Capital Fund) for five years. Many counties rely on these annual lottery appropriations to pay debt service obligations on prior capital projects. The General Assembly should repeal G.S. 115C-546.2(f) to restore the Annual Capital Fund payments to needs-based grant recipients.

### **School Safety**

The General Assembly should continue its efforts since 2018 to fund adequate levels of mental health support personnel (School Psychologists, Social Workers, Counselors, and Nurses) in our public schools. The ratios of students to mental health personnel in North Carolina do not come close to meeting the national recommended averages. Increased pay for these mental health support personnel is also important to enable LEAs to recruit highly qualified candidates for these critical positions.

School Resource Officers (SROs) play a vital role in the safety of the school community. With only 61% of our schools having an SRO, additional funding is needed to expand protection for all students, staff, and volunteers. Prior year grants for school safety equipment and SRO training were nonrecurring but should be reauthorized as recurring grants in 2021. Additional SRO training is also extremely important based on the unique role of law enforcement in schools.

### **Recruiting and Retaining Top Talent**<sup>2</sup>

A competitive market salary is a big component in attracting and retaining school personnel. Permanent pay increases should be provided for all teachers, instructional support personnel, and assistant principals paid on the “A” Teacher Salary Schedule. A pay increase should also be given to noncertified school personnel that did not receive additional compensation in the last biennium.

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<sup>2</sup> Satisfies the 2021 Leandro Action Plan

The General Assembly can assist LEAs' efforts to recruit and retain qualified teachers by restoring supplemental pay for teachers with advanced degrees in their subject area.

Enhancing professional development opportunities, teacher preparation programs, and the teacher pipeline should be priorities. The teacher shortage problem is impacting districts statewide. Options should include creating new programs and expanding existing ones, such as New Teacher Support Program, Advanced Teaching Roles Program, Teacher Assistant Tuition Reimbursement Program, and Teaching Fellows Program.

**Early Learning**<sup>3</sup>

Additional investments in a quality pre-k program are crucial for kindergarten readiness and laying the foundation for student success. That foundation is what helps to ensure a student is reading on grade level by the end of third grade.

In addition, the State should continue to invest in K-3 literacy programs and supports. With numerous assessments required in the early grades, more state funded teacher assistants (TAs) are needed in K-3 to work with students and support the teachers who are required to juggle multiple responsibilities simultaneously. The bottom line is that TAs are valuable assets, and the proposed ratios will provide a benefit to young children during these formative years.

Current K-3 TA Ratios

- K: 2 TAs per every 3 classes
- 1-2: 1 TA per every 2 classes
- 3: 1 TA per every 3 classes

Proposed K-3 TA Ratios

- K-1: 1 TA per every class
- 2-3: 1 TA per every 2 classes

Additional consideration should be given to making the proposed ratios even lower (1 TA for every K-3 classroom) on a temporary basis to address the learning loss due to COVID-19.

**Administrator Ethics Training**

Ethics laws can be complex. They vary between the federal government and state governments, as well as state to state. Therefore, NCSBA believes all school administrators involved in the creation or administration of contracts should be

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<sup>3</sup> Satisfies the 2021 Leandro Action Plan

required to have at least two hours of ethics training upon such employment and in odd-numbered years thereafter. It is especially important given that 43% of North Carolina's LEAs are led by a superintendent with less than three years of experience in that position.

### **Local Charter School Funding/Relations**

The current public school funding structure should be revised so that school districts and charter schools both receive local tax dollars directly from county commissioners, instead of having the charter school portion of local revenue pass through the LEA. Revising how local education dollars are distributed will make the process more efficient and ensure that charter schools receive their fair share of local tax dollars in a timely manner.

### **Unpublished Legislative Agenda Item**

NCSBA is not opposed to all school employees making at least \$15 per hour, as long as school systems are granted at least a one-year notice and a minimum of three years to phase in the requirement.

### **Guiding Principles**

During each legislative session there are always unanticipated bills introduced that affect public schools. The following are guiding principles that NCSBA will use to evaluate legislation that is introduced during the legislative session.

- NCSBA opposes any legislation that would violate federal laws or the state constitution.
- NCSBA opposes any legislation that would require school systems to expend additional financial resources without the State providing those necessary resources. NCSBA also will continue to advocate for funding for currently existing mandates.
- NCSBA opposes any legislation that attempts to diminish or take away local control and supports legislation that provides additional local control and decision making.

- NCSBA supports legislation that creates safe environments for students and staff as long as it is consistent with the aforementioned principles.
- NCSBA supports providing school districts with funds sufficient to guarantee full funding of all funding formulas.
- NCSBA supports an efficient hiring system for employees that will provide a competitive salary and benefits package for all school employees.
- NCSBA supports legislation, policies, and initiatives that better prepare young children for success in the K-12 education system and in life.